

Hunter's Revenge

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Chapter One

Hunter Billingsley considered himself to be a patient man. After all, he'd been chief of police in Clear Creek for eight years now. And boy did that ever take a lot of patience, especially when he had to deal with that ornery sheriff, Charlie Randall. The man was always trying to horn in on things inside the city limits where he had no business being. That was Hunter's domain.

And then there were the residents of Clear Creek. He knew that there just had to be some of strangest, nosiest, gossipiest, and most downright troublesome people he'd ever been around. But he had to admit though that there were a few good ones mixed in with the lot.

He ran his hand through his military cut brown hair then pounded his desk with his fist.

Patience! That was what he'd been thinking about. Yeah, he'd had to have a lot of patience with his ex-wife for the past fifteen years. Sure, things should have been nice and neat when Becky left him and went back home to Little Rock. But there was one minor complication. Karrie!

Karrie! She was his biggest concern now. She was sixteen and apparently into everything a girl that age could possibly get into in the big city, especially at the high school. Yeah, he was afraid that if she hadn't already, she'd be into drugs before long.

There just had to be a way to get Karrie straightened out. She'd been suspended several times last school year and now it was only the third week of this new school year and she had already been suspended again yesterday. This time, the police had somehow gotten involved. Becky had said it had to do with some teenagers getting beer and causing trouble. She claimed not to know exactly what kind of trouble yet.

Well, what could he do almost three hundred miles away? Sure, he'd had court appointed visitation rights from the beginning with Karrie, but for the past few years, his time with her had only been when he could get down to Little Rock for a few days. She refused to come up here to what she and her mother both called the end of the earth.

That's it! That's what he'd do all right. He had lots of vacation time, never had a reason to take it. He'd take a week off and go down to Little Rock and see if he could get anywhere with Karrie. He had always been sure that Becky just didn't pay enough attention to Karrie and let her run wild. Maybe he could do some good if he had her to himself for a while.

With that decision made, he was about to go out on patrol when his phone rang. It was Darla on the intercom.

"Hunter, your ex-wife is on the line again."

He looked at his office door, which was standing open and decided he'd go ahead and take the call without closing the door. Darla was the only one out there anyway.

"Okay Becky, do you have the details on what Karrie was supposed to have done the other night?"

"No, Hunter, if you'd just stop talking long enough, I could tell you what she's gone and done this time."

Did Becky screech like that when they'd been married? She sure didn't seem like the same woman he'd married back then though.

When Hunter remained silent, she continued, "She ran away . . . again."

Hunter had a sinking feeling in his stomach. Sure, Karrie had run off twice before, but this time there might be more to it since it sounded like she may be in trouble with the police too.

“Do you have any idea where she might have gone?”

There was a long silence on the other end. “I really don’t know for sure but . . .”

Hunter waited for her to finish and when she didn’t, he said, “What aren’t you telling me Becky? Come on don’t you think I ought to know. Karrie’s still my daughter too.”

“Yeah, and you don’t know how bad I wished that little fact wasn’t true.”

Hunter was quickly losing most of that patience he was so proud of. “Becky! What is going on down there?”

After another short pause, Becky cleared her throat and said, “Well, every time lately I’ve had to say anything to her, she’s been throwing in my face that you wouldn’t treat her that way.”

She let that hang in the air between them before finally saying, “I suspect she may have headed up your way this time.”

“What? That’s almost three hundred miles. Have you alerted the police down there?”

“I did, but they won’t do much for another day especially since she’s done it before and never went very far those other two times.”

“Well, that’s just fine and dandy. Who knows what could happen to her in that amount of time.”

Hunter hung the phone up cursing big city police departments. He just sat there for a few minutes trying to straighten things out in his mind. He had to find his daughter. He couldn’t just sit around while she was out there on her own. She was too young. After all she was his baby girl.

He was still trying to decide what he could do on this end, if anything, when Darla interrupted his thoughts buzzing him again. Darla Perkins was not only his secretary, but she was also the daytime receptionist and dispatcher all rolled into one. Her husband Dave was one of his sergeants.

“Hunter, we’ve got a silent alarm down at the Farmers and Merchants Bank. Dave and Paul are already heading that way.”

Hunter slammed the phone down and ran for the door. On the way, he grabbed his outer armored vest, slipped it on, and zipped it up. He was in his squad car quickly and headed for the bank, which was out on the west side of town by the high school.

Running silent, he approached the bank from the north, through the Walmart parking lot, knowing the others were already in place on the east and west sides of the bank. He parked in the store parking lot across from the bank’s drive-up windows but partially hidden by a full-size van.

He had barely opened his door with his AR in his hand when he saw the outside door by the drive-up windows open and two men wearing Halloween masks and carrying ARs stepped out.

Hunter waited until the bank door closed behind them then reached for his PA and said, “Police! Drop your weapons and put your hands on your heads.”

One of them saw Hunter right away and began shooting at him. He could hear the bullets ping as they hit the van he was standing behind.

He called out again. “Last warning, drop your weapons.”

They were both running to Hunter’s right now but both were shooting at him. Hunter made sure there was no one else in the line of fire before he began shooting back at them. He hit the one in front immediately and he went down. Then Hunter saw Dave poke his AR around the corner of the bank and the other guy threw his weapon down then threw his hands up.

Hunter grabbed his radio mic and said, “Darla, we’re Code Four here and we’re all fine but one of them will need medical.”

Just as Hunter was walking toward the suspects, a sheriff’s department car came to a screeching halt next to him and out popped Charlie Randall with his AR at the ready.

Charlie took one look toward the bank where Dave and Paul were hooking the suspects up. Then he looked back at Hunter and with a grin threw a sloppy salute at him, slid back into his car, and roared off.

* * *

Sabrina Elliott was tired and very well knew the reason for it. She and her dad had worked until midnight last night on their current Mustang. She took one last look in the mirror, tried to ignore the tired eyes, and wondered if she was beginning to look old. She was forty-one now after all. Not too many years ago, she’d considered that to be ancient . . . but not anymore.

She stepped out of the restroom and surveyed her daytime domain. The Clear Creek Public Library had been her project from the beginning, close to twenty years ago. Sure, the town had had a library before that, but it had been contained totally in a single room down at city hall. Now, they had their own building and all kinds of state, federal, and even corporate grants to keep it well stocked and staffed. She was the only fulltime employee but she had two part-time assistants.

She was downright proud of what they had done with her library. She smiled to herself. She had to be careful who she said that to though. Some people around town were somewhat jealous of her and her position here. Why, just the other day, she’d overheard Naomi Tidwell making some sort of snide remark about her to Maxine Fuller, the hairdresser.

Well, she could handle the criticism. She had two of the best friends a girl could ever want to have supporting her all the way. Tiffany Cameron – no Devereaux now, had been her best friend since she was in second grade and Tiffany had been in first grade. She giggled to herself. She’d had to be Tiffany’s friend. Tiffany was and still is so small that everyone always picked on her. But Sabrina, who was now 5’10” had at first been her protector, then eventually they’d become friends for life.

She smiled at that then thought of her newest best friend, Candy Maxwell who had only been in town for a year now. But in that year, she’d married the mayor, Ryan Maxwell and not only joined their families but had also joined her specialty coffee and pastry shop with his family’s long-time café to the betterment of the whole community.

Sabrina made her way to the front desk while taking a quick look around to see if anyone had come in while she was in the restroom. Seeing no one, she stepped into her office, which was directly behind the circulation desk.

She’d been working on her computer for a few minutes when she heard the front door open and someone shouting her name. It was Tiffany. That was when she remembered Tiffany’s doctor appointment was this morning.

“Sabrina! She’s going to be normal!”

Sabrina looked up and saw Tiffany’s husband, Chase standing behind her. They both had huge grins on their faces.

“Oh Tiffany, that’s so wonderful.” They met at the circulation desk and embraced. It had always been awkward for Sabrina to hug her friend who was so much shorter than her but especially now with her huge

stomach sticking out between them. Their blond hair, which was close to the same shade, came together in a curtain all around them.

Tiffany was pregnant and at the age of forty, the chances of complications, especially birth defects, were extremely high.

Sabrina quickly sobered and said, "Then there's nothing to worry about anymore?"

Tiffany was shaking her head, but Chase shouted out, "Our baby girl is going to be perfect in every way. The doctor even said that she's about normal size right now too, which isn't always the case. Isn't that just great?"

"Oh my, yes it is. Have you told the boys yet?"

Chase had two teenage sons from his first marriage, his wife having died from breast cancer almost three years ago.

Tiffany giggled and said, "As soon as we get back to the school, Chase is going to call them into his office so we can tell them. Oh, they're going to be so excited too."

Chase kept smiling and said, "Especially Tyler. That boy can't wait to play with his little sister."

They left soon and Sabrina sat at her desk with a huge grin on her face. That was exactly what she'd needed to lift her out of the depressing thoughts she'd been sinking into.

She busied herself with computer work and helping several patrons until noon when one of her assistants, Wendy Rader came in.

Sabrina was just about to go over to the café for lunch when she noticed a young girl come in through the front door and just stand there looking bewildered and lost. There was something vaguely familiar about the girl but she couldn't quite place her.

Sabrina walked up to the girl who was still standing in the doorway and said, "May I help you?"

The girl looked up at Sabrina and burst into tears.

Sabrina quickly led her into her office and called out to Wendy, "Wendy, could you get us a glass of water please?"

She set the girl down in a padded chair in front of her desk and handed her a box of tissue. She waited to see if the girl would be able to stop long enough to talk to her.

Sabrina took that moment to study the girl. She looked to be about fifteen or sixteen with shoulder length brown hair. She had to look close to see the dark blue eyes through all the tears. There was just something so very familiar about her. But Sabrina didn't really think she was from around there anywhere.

The girl was dressed in dirty jeans and t-shirt and they looked as if they'd been on her for a while.

Finally, the girl dried her eyes, blew her nose, and wadded the tissue into a ball in her hand. When she looked up at Sabrina, something seemed to pass between them. No matter why this girl was here, no matter what was going on in her life, Sabrina suddenly felt a strange affinity with her and she was almost certain that the girl felt it too.

When the girl looked up at her, Sabrina said, "I would like to help you Dear. What's your name?"

She began shaking her head as soon as Sabrina started talking. "No! No names yet. I don't know what I'm going to do yet, so I don't want you to know who I am yet."

Sabrina wasn't sure she should go along with that but the girl looked as if she might bolt right on out the door if she didn't agree.

"Okay, Dear we'll keep it this way for now." She looked closer and said, "I'll bet you're hungry."

The girl started to shake her head no but then blushed and nodded.

Sabrina stood slowly and said, “My friend runs a café only a couple of blocks down the street and I was just getting ready to go there for lunch when you came in. Why don’t we go down there so we can both get something to eat?”

* * *

Hunter sank into his desk chair, weary yet very satisfied that his department had been able to catch the bank robbers. It looked like the one he shot would pull through. He was glad of that. Even though the man had been shooting at him, he never really wanted to kill anyone for any reason. He’d had enough of that in the Army.

As he leaned back in his chair, he suddenly realized that he was hungry. In fact, he was starving. He looked at the clock on the wall by the door and saw that it was twelve-thirty. That was when he remembered he hadn’t taken time for breakfast that morning either. There hadn’t been enough time to go by the café and he hated to eat alone in his big two-story house.

He headed out and called to Darla as he passed her, “I’m going down to the café for some lunch. Want me to bring you back anything?”

Darla, who was five years older than Hunter, still looked much younger with her short blond hair and blue eyes. She smiled at him and held up what looked like a couple of Tupperware containers.

He smiled back at her and began walking down the street toward Maxwell’s Café and Pastry Shop. Ryan, one of his best friends, owned the place and Hunter usually ate most of his meals there.

He decided to take care of two things at once. While he was walking, he decided to call Becky to see if she’d heard anything from Karrie.

He was frustrated all over again after disconnecting the call. Becky didn’t know anything new and took it out on him. Somehow, everything bad that Karri ever did was his fault, even though he seldom ever saw the girl. He had to calm down. He didn’t want to take his bad mood out on Ryan or anyone else he might meet.

When he entered the café, which consisted of the original Maxwell Café combined with the shop next door that had been an antiques shop, the place was about half-full. The left side as you came in was basically the same as before but the right side, with most of the wall between knocked out, was where Candy, Ryan’s wife, had all her pastry cases and specialty coffee machines.

The women usually gathered on that side and the men usually gathered on this side. He noticed a couple of blond heads together over there and snickered. There were usually three blond heads over there but Tiffany was probably still at school. Today though, he noticed brown hair in the huddle with the two blonds.

He turned his eyes away from the women and made his way up to the counter where Ryan Maxwell was sitting on a stool on the other side of it.

Ryan immediately placed a cup of coffee in front of Hunter as he sat back down on the stool across from him. “Missed you this morning.”

Hunter smiled. Ryan was a man of few words and that was one of the things that Hunter liked best about him.

“Yeah, I didn’t have time for breakfast this morning so I’m real hungry now.”

Ryan didn’t say another word but stood and made his way back to the kitchen. A few minutes later, he returned with a large cheeseburger and a pile of home fries on a plate, which he sat in front of Hunter.

While Hunter ate, Ryan talked about some of the things people had been talking about that morning.

His mind wasn't really on what Ryan was saying. It kept alternating back and forth between the bank robbery this morning and Karrie's running away again.

He looked up from his empty plate to see Ryan glaring at him. Now what? He hadn't said anything at all, so it couldn't be anything he'd said.

"What's wrong Ryan?"

"Well, I would say that you're not acting like we've been friends for close to twenty years now."

Hunter still didn't have a clue as to why Ryan could be mad at him.

When he gave Ryan a puzzled look, Ryan finally said, "Just when were you going to get around to telling me anything at all about that bank robbery you broke up this morning. Why, that's all everybody's been talking about all morning."

Now Hunter was in tune with Ryan. But before he could say anything though, Ryan said, "I heard you killed one of those skunks."

Hunter was about to growl at Ryan when he noticed the smile or was it a smirk on the man's face and the twinkle in his eye. His old friend had simply been baiting him to get him to talk. Okay, two could play at this game.

"Nah, I killed both of them."

At the look of shock on Ryan's face, Hunter burst out laughing. Before he could say anything else, Ryan looked him in the eye and said, "You know I always could tell when you were lying. All I gotta do is look to see if your mouth is flapping."

They both laughed a little more before Hunter sobered up and said, "I did have to shoot one of them though when they were both shooting at me with ARs. They say that even though I got a lung, that he'll probably recover enough to stand trial by the time it comes around."

Ryan leaned over the counter and said, "I can tell that there's something else bothering you too. What is it?"

Hunter shook his head. That was the kind of friendship he had with both Ryan Maxwell and Chase Devereaux, the high school principal. They could always tell when one of the others was troubled and never hesitated to do what they could to help.

He blew out a huge sigh and said, "Aw, it's Karrie again. Not only did she get suspended again but Becky said it had something to do with the law this time too."

Before Ryan could comment, he went on, "And to top it all off, she ran away again."

Ryan shook his head and said, "Man, when it rains, it pours. Did your ex have any idea where Karrie might have gone this time?"

Hunter groaned and said, "Yeah, she has this dumb idea that Karrie might be heading up here this time. Can you imagine that? I hardly ever see the kid and when I do, she'll barely have anything to do with me. Does that sound like a kid who would head up here to be with me?"

Just then, he heard laughter coming from the three women on the other side of the café. He started to look back at Ryan when he heard one of them laughing by herself. That laugh sounded familiar. It took him a moment to realize that it sounded just like Becky's laugh. No! It couldn't be!

He jumped up so fast that the coffee cup Ryan had just filled turned over and flooded the counter. Hunter called out his apologies to Ryan who was busy mopping it up as he headed for the other side of the café. It couldn't be. Could it?

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As Sabrina sat there in the café watching the girl eat, she mused that it must have been some time since she'd eaten. She attacked her cheeseburger and fries so fast and it all disappeared so quickly that Sabrina feared she might get indigestion. But no, the two milk shakes she downed with it should help keep that from happening.

Sabrina sat there trying to observe the girl without being caught. There was definitely something familiar about this girl. She just knew that she should know her from somewhere but she couldn't figure it out yet. But she would, if it took her all day.

But the real question right now was, what was she going to do with the girl. She didn't even know her name. She was obviously high school age and should be in school. But Sabrina was certain that if she said anything about that, or if she brought Hunter in on it, the girl would run. And she just didn't want that to happen. She wanted to help the girl, if she could only figure out how.

She had noticed from the first, in the library, that the girl had a panicky, almost frightened look about her. What could have happened to her to give her that look?

Just then, Sabrina looked up at movement from her left. Suddenly, everything made sense when she saw Hunter standing there with his hands on his hips and glaring down at the girl as she was listening to something that Candy was telling her.

Now she knew why the girl looked so familiar. The girl must have sensed the ominous presence behind her because she turned around slowly. When she saw Hunter, her face turned pale and she brought her hand up to her mouth with a small cry.

Sabrina didn't like the look on Hunter's face. Whatever the reason, this poor girl had gone through a lot to get here and she didn't need her father yelling at her on top of everything else.

Before Hunter could say anything, Sabrina jumped off her stool, stepped between them, and looked him straight in the eye. She had always enjoyed the fact that since she was so tall, she could stand eye to eye with most men.

He started to push past her to get to the girl but Sabrina grabbed his arm and pulled him away. She kept pulling him until they were half-way across the large dining room. She was able to do this simply because he was too shocked at first to fight her at all. She didn't want him near the girl until he calmed down.

But when he recovered from his shock, he started to push past her again. That was when she placed her hands on her hips and glared into his eyes.

"Hunter Billingsley. If you are going to yell at that poor girl, you will have me on your back as soon as you start."

That certainly got his attention. He looked at her as if she was crazy and maybe she was just a little right then. But all she knew was that no matter what she'd done, that little girl did not need to be yelled at.

She could see that he was processing what she'd just said, so she waited to see what he might do next. She didn't have long to wait.

"Sabrina Elliott, if you don't get out of my way right now, I'm going to pick you up and move you."

She was shaking her head long before he finished. "Oh no you won't Hunter Billingsley. That is not how it's going to happen." She tossed her head back toward the others causing her shoulder length blond hair to fly all around, almost hitting him in the face. "That little girl has gone through an awful lot just to get here. Stop and think about that for just one second, if you can. You need to be wondering why she came to you? She never has before, so why now?"

She could tell that he was thinking about that. Now, she might be able to talk some sense into him, if she hurried.

She reached out and placed her hands on his shoulders and gripped him tight hoping he would stay put long enough for her to calm him down and get him to approach the girl calmly. But what could she say now? She didn't have a clue.

Then she remembered that Tiffany was always saying that when you didn't know what to say next, then you should quickly and silently, ask God and He'd give you the words to say.

So Sabrina said a quick 'Help me Lord' prayer in her mind and it worked!

"Hunter." He looked up and into her eyes then. "Do you love that girl back there?"

"Why of course I do."

"Do you want the best of everything for her?"

"Of course!"

She smiled at him and shook him slightly, with her hands still on his shoulders. "Then be nice, treat her the way you would want to be treated if you were her."

When he nodded and started to go around her again, she finished with, "No. I don't think you're ready just yet."

When he gave her a puzzled look, which was quickly turning to anger again, she knew she had to hurry to get the rest in.

"Just go over there and sit down next to her. If you can't force yourself to give her a hug, then just sit there and try to smile at her." She pulled her hands back but then poked her finger into his chest. "If you can't do that yet, then don't go back over there until you can."

He glared into her eyes then and of course, she glared right back at him, thankful all over again for her height. She knew just when she finally got through to him. She could see the anger in his eyes turn to wonder, then humor, and finally a chuckle came from him.

"You would have made a good cop Sabrina."

She still wasn't sure she'd really gotten through to him totally yet so she stayed right there blocking his path. All the air seemed to go out of him all at once and he sank into a chair at a nearby table.

He sat there with his head in his hands for a minute or two. Sabrina took the opportunity to glance over at the counter where his daughter was looking on with huge eyes and a shocked expression on her face. Sabrina knew that she was probably thinking that she'd never seen anyone stand up to her dad that way before.

Well, it had felt sort of good at that. She'd have to do some thinking about that later.